

When Not to Translate

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We live in a time of retranslation. New versions of the classics appear fairly regularly, and of course, as soon as the seventy years of copyright following an author's death runs out, there is a spate of new translations. So Proust and Thomas Mann have recently been retranslated into English, while writers like F. Scott Fitzgerald, Virginia Woolf, and D. H. Lawrence are all reappearing in new versions in Europe.

The logic behind this phenomenon is clear enough. A translation inevitably reflects the language and style of its time. For later generations, a translation seems more reminiscent of our own past culture than the culture the work originated in. Consider Pope's *Iliad*:

*Achilles' wrath, to Greece the direful spring
Of woes unnumber'd, heavenly goddess, sing!*

How can one think of anything but eighteenth-century British poetry? How can one not feel it will be easier to read in Ian Johnston's 2010 rendering:

*Sing, Goddess, sing of the rage of Achilles, son of
Peleus —
that murderous anger which condemned Achaeans to countless agonies*

Or compare the Reverend Cary's *Inferno*, published in 1805:

*In the midway of this our mortal life,
I found me in a gloomy wood, astray
Gone from the path direct*

With Robert Hollander's from 2000:

*Midway in the journey of our life
I came to myself in a dark wood,
for the straight way was lost.*

In both these cases we feel an impediment to reading has been removed. Our translator is working directly from the older text into a modern idiom, albeit with a respect for the text's age and distance.

But are new translations always better, or always feasible, even? Some time ago I was asked to do a retranslation of the *Decameron*. Such a commission is an honor and a responsibility. And a huge investment of time. The Penguin Classics edition runs to more than one thousand pages. So before giving an answer I thought I'd try translating a couple of passages for myself. Here is a passage from the fourth story of the first day. A young monk, guessing that his lovemaking with a girl smuggled into his cell has been observed by his abbot, contrives to have the abbot find the girl there alone in the hope that he will commit the same sin. I translated:

Seeing the abbot come in, the girl lost her head and started to cry, afraid she would be disgraced. Looking her over and finding her fresh and pretty, the abbot, old as he was, immediately felt the same hot carnal urge his young monk had felt, and began to say to himself: Well, why not enjoy yourself while you can, trouble and strife are always on offer, if that's what you want. She's a pretty girl and no one knows she's here; if I can get her to give me a good time, I can't see why I shouldn't. Who will know? No one, ever, and a sin hidden is half forgiven. You're hardly going to get a chance like this again. Then, it's only wise, I'd say, to enjoy what the Good Lord sends your way.



Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, Paris

Illustration from a French edition of *The Decameron*, fifteenth century

This was as close to the semantics of the original as I could manage, but seemed drained of all its fourteenth-century energy. Expressions like “hot carnal urge,” “trouble and strife,” or the proverbial “a sin hidden is half forgiven” seem somewhat fake, or simply quaint rather than authentic and vigorous. I checked various other modern translations to see if they felt notably different. Let’s look at just one, G.H. McWilliam’s 1972 translation, which is still the current Penguin Classics version:

When she saw the Abbot coming in, the girl was terrified out of her wits, and began to weep for shame. Master Abbot, having looked her up and down, saw that she was a nice, comely wench, and despite his years he was promptly filled with fleshly cravings, no less intense than those his young monk had experienced. And he began to say to himself: “Well, well! Why not enjoy myself a little when I have the opportunity? After all, I can have my fill of sorrow and afflictions whenever I like. This is a fine-looking wench, and not a living soul knows that she is here. If I can persuade her to play my game, I see no reason why I shouldn’t do it. Who is there to know? No one will ever find out, and a sin that’s hidden is half forgiven. I may never get another chance as good as this. It’s always a good idea, in my opinion to accept any gift that the Good Lord places in our path.

There are 174 words here as opposed to my 137. And it’s easy to see why. In an attempt to rediscover the energy of the original, McWilliam hams things up. *La giovane...tutto smarri*, Boccaccio wrote, meaning the girl was quite lost or disoriented, not “terrified out of her wits.” Nor did she weep for shame. She wept *temendo di vergogna*, afraid of shame, afraid she would be disgraced. Of course McWilliam prefers pat phrases whenever he can find them because the *Decameron* has the reputation of being colloquial and idiomatic. So we have “fine looking wench” for *bella giovane* in the Italian. Or “play my game” for *fare i piacer miei* (literally, “do what I want/give me pleasure”). The strategy reaches its climax in “any gift that the Good Lord places in our path,” where neither gifts nor paths are mentioned in the original. It all sounds dangerously close to Christmas pantomime.

The problem is that much of the pleasure of reading the *Decameron* in Italian comes from feeling the language’s distance from, but also closeness to modern Italian, feeling how surprisingly straightforward, almost brusque it is. There is no quaintness in it at all. Here is the original:

La giovane vedendo venir l’abate tutta smarri, e temendo di vergogna cominciò a piagnere. Messer l’abate, postole l’occhio adosso e veggendola bella e fresca, ancora che vecchio fosse sentì subitamente non meno cocenti gli stimoli della carne che sentiti avesse il suo giovane monaco; e fra se stesso cominciò a dire: “Deh, perché non prendo io del piacere quando io ne posso avere, con ciò sia cosa che il dispiacere e la noia, sempre che io ne vorrò, sieno apparecchiati? Costei è una bella giovane e è qui che niuna persona del mondo il sa: se io la posso recare a fare i piacer miei, io non so perché io nol mi faccia. Chi il saprà? Egli nol saprà persona mai, e peccato celato è mezzo perdonato. Questo caso non avverrà forse mai più: io estimo ch’egli sia gran senno a pigliarsi del bene, quando Domenedio ne manda altrui.

One hundred forty-nine words. It’s all very rapid, and flexible, and when it does move toward the bawdy (*veggendola bella e fresca*) or the proverbial (*peccato celato è mezzo perdonato*) it all seems to fit. It even rhymes. The language, the content, the sentiments mesh. I went to check a version in modern Italian—because as with Chaucer there are modern versions—and immediately had the same impression that I had with my own attempt: it was correct enough, but all the energy was gone. However, what finally decided me not to accept this commission was my discovery of the very first translation of the same passage in John Florio’s 1620 edition.

Florio, we remember, was the first translator of *Montaigne*; his Italian father had been a Franciscan friar, and some people have made a case for claiming that he was actually William Shakespeare himself. Here he is:

But finding it to be the Lord Abbot, shee fell on her knees weeping, as fearing now to receive publike shame, by being betrayed in this unkinde manner. My Lord Abbot looking demurely on the Maide, and perceiving her to be faire, feate, and lovely; felt immediately (although he was olde) no lesse spurring on to fleshly desires, then the young Monke before had done; whereupon he beganne to conferre thus privately with himselfe. Why should I not take pleasure, when I may freely have it? Cares and molestations I endure every day, but sildome find such delights prepared for me. This is a delicate sweete young Damosell, and here is no eye that can discover me. If I can endure her to doe as I would have her, I know no reason why I should gaine-say it. No man can know it, or any tongue blaze it abroad; and sinne so concealed, is halfe pardoned. Such a faire fortune as this is, perhaps hereafter will never befall me; and therefore I hold it wisdom, to take such a benefit when a man may enjoy it.

Reading this, I experienced exactly the pleasures I feel reading Boccaccio in Italian. Albeit nearly three hundred years after the original was written, Florio still moves in a world where the whole thing makes sense, doesn’t need to be quaint. And he is a supreme stylist too. He can find exactly the idiom in the English of his time. However good a

translator might be today, I doubt whether the same level of conviction is possible. Certainly, I didn't feel I could achieve it.

Perhaps this perception of mine is false, due to my inability to judge language written so long ago. But I think not. I suspect what it suggests is the importance of finding the right translator for the first translation of a literary work, one who has a genuine affinity with the style of the original, and, above all, can root it into our own literature in a moment when it makes sense, when the culture can really receive it in its own idiom. In Italy, with the lapse of copyright on Faulkner's writing, there have been a number of new Faulkner translations that are doubtless more semantically accurate than those made back in the Forties and Fifties. And yet those old translations—made when a modernist work was still a matter of excitement, rather than an aesthetic museum piece—seem more aware of the energy and spirit of the original and certainly a better read than more recent, academic efforts.

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